



# PANDEMIC AND THE LITERARY CONVALESCENCE: A STUDY OF BRICK LANE BY MONICA ALI

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## ABSTRACT

Where sickness looms and where sickness breeds, the virus of the powerful plays upon those in penury. The sordid side of all pandemics is that while the weak and ailing are struggling to survive and the hegemony are making profit. Such catastrophe lays bare the ground for introspection and gives birth to an awakened community. Apart from the sick and the poor, pandemic has victimized women as well. Women have been in a lockdown like situation under patriarchal and the cultural politics. Long before pandemic confined them to their homes, women have been living in isolation amidst the suffocating walls of their houses. This is a testimony to the resilience of women suffering stoically in isolation. Woman's body ailing due to the patriarchal oppression, are the best site for play of man's power politics. Sick patriarchy brings in the politics of culture and tradition to achieve its hidden motives. A community of awakened literati emerges after a period of resilience that tries to introspect the reasons behind the suffering of women. Their ardent quest compels them to revisit literary works from a feminist angle and unravel the tools used by patriarchy to justify their subjugation. The pervasive nature of gender bias becomes obvious as we go through the pages of literature. The paper discusses the novel *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali to reveal a community of women who are the sufferer.

**KEYWORDS:** Pandemic, Power and Cultural Politics, Patriarchy, Misogyny

## INTRODUCTION

The recrudescence of COVID-19 pandemic has submerged the entire world into a gloom and taken a toll over human lives. This global pandemic has affected not only the public health but also the global economy. However, during such antagonistic times, the powerful see an opportunity to advance and make arrangements to grab power. The powerful exploit the weak and the poor in their ardent quest for power. Thus it is the sick and the vulnerable who are the victims of power politics. According to Foucault, power is based on knowledge and they shape it in accordance with their anonymous intentions. In times of turbulence knowledge is power. Control of knowledge is something that the powerful always do. If you control knowledge, you can control people. He thus manipulates the system by exercising knowledge through institutions and hence justifies his oppression. Such egotistical puissance does not think of humanity even during such catastrophes. Puissance, a French word, connotes being powerful. When you have a strong influence over someone, you become a puissance. It is the weak and the ailing who bear the brunt of power politics. The deplorable side of all this is that these illnesses are actually allowed to flourish by the puissance who want to fulfill their selfish motives. They create binary opposites like poor-rich, weak-strong, upper class- lower class, male- female, sick- healthy and developed - under developed to ensure their own survival. Binary opposition is a key concept in structuralism that states all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another. The term on the left is prioritized over the term on the right. The problem with a system of binary opposition is that it creates boundaries between groups of people and leads to prejudices and discrimination. The opposite group referred to as the other. The wielders of power pretend that they want to eradicate these illnesses but in reality help it to boom and perpetuate. The greed for power is to be seen everywhere. Apart from the sick and the poor, pandemic has victimized women as well. Nevertheless, women are the real victims. They have been undergoing pandemic like situation since centuries. Patriarchy has isolated women from the public affairs and quarantined her within the four walls of the house. This is a testimony to the resilience of women suffering silently the period of isolation, whereas men vented frustration when marooned and confined during the pandemic. Wendy Doniger in *On Hinduism* points out, "The female sex... has never found favor with any of the world's religions, or with their priests and prophets..." (2013:259). Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate society in their roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. History is evident that during the wars of independence or any other war fought for power or glory, it was women whose bodies were mutilated by men to proclaim their victory over the other. Menon and Bhasin (1998) in their book *Borders and Boundaries* say "Women in India's Partition document cases where women jumped into water -wells or set themselves ablaze to save their family honor. As women zealously volunteered to end their lives, there were cases of unwilling women who were emotionally appealed to by their families to commit suicide" (1998: 42). These lines portray that men wage war- war for religion, power and territory at the cost of women. Mutilation of women's bodies during sectarian conflict is a way to show men's supremacy over women.

## Pandemic and Women Subjugation

Even the present pandemic reports that women were abused during the lockdown. The pandemic has highlighted many existing inequalities and injus-

tices within our society including those affecting women. As a result, many women have come to realize the extent to which they have been oppressed and marginalized. Pandemic has made women realize their oppression is through the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. Women have been more likely to lose their jobs or have their work hours reduced and more often engaged in precarious employment sector. Pandemic had a blighting effect on women as they lost jobs during this period and had no social security. Also the unpaid labor that she does at home leaves her with no time for career making. Women have been burdened with additional care giving responsibilities in family due to which they are forced to choose between paid work and their care giving responsibilities. As a result they have to often sacrifice their career. Furthermore the pandemic has highlighted the gendered nature of our society's response to crisis. Women have been excluded from decision making processes related to the pandemic. This has perpetuated existing power imbalances and further marginalized women. Additionally, the pandemic has exposed the prevalence of gender based violence and domestic abuse. Women faced domestic violence as they were trapped with their abusers. Overall, the pandemic has made women realize the extent to which they are oppressed and marginalized within our society. The Pandemic has created a unique opportunity for women to come together and form a literary community of awakened individuals. The pandemic has forced people to spend more time at home, leading to an increase in reading and writing. Lonely and isolated women turned to literature as a way to escape the stresses of the pandemic and find solace in the written word. Women took to writing and sharing their hidden emotions and sensibilities, creating a larger community of literary enthusiasts. "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Cixous, 1976: 880). Thus, women choose to write through her body, through a language that breaks all binaries and codes. Literary communities provide a space for women to come together and share their experiences, thoughts and ideas. By discussing and reinterpreting literature, women are able to connect with each other on a deeper level and understand the sufferings of women in society. Pandemic has led to an increase in awareness around social and political issues, particularly those affecting women. As a result, many women are turning to literature as a way to explore and understand these issues. By engaging with literature that deals with topics like feminism, racial justice, women are able to deepen their understanding of these issues and become engaged in creating positive change.

## Convalescence through Literature

Literature is analyzed from an eye of a critic, to unearth the unseen power politics and give voice to the voiceless. The subaltern on the periphery is thus brought to the forefront. Instances of such gender bias are to be found in the novel *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. In the novel, Nazneen is a victim of patriarchal set up. Patriarchy uses the politics of culture and tradition to grab power and hence assign a subordinate position to women. Subordination means when one is forced to live under the control of other. Thus, in order to subjugate women, patriarchy enforces the social traditions and customs and assigns different social behavior to boys and girls right from the childhood. The women are taught traditional values of submissiveness, slavery, male supremacy and protection of her family's honor which actually are quite demeaning for her. Culture and tradition play a poignant role in assigning a secondary position to women in our society. It is the favorite play tool propagated by patriarchy to justify women's subordination to men. The

misogynistic values that culture and tradition propagate for women are a hindrance in their way for emancipation. Thus this illness renders woman sick, weak and fragile. Misogyny is hatred or contempt for women or girls. It is a way of keeping women at a lower status than men. We see in the novel that Nazneen's desire for identity is crushed right in the childhood by her mother, a tradition bound woman, who has instilled traditional values in Nazneen. With these values she agrees to marry a man 40 years older than her. "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma" (Ali, 2004: 16). All she desires is to be an ideal subservient wife like her mother. Nancy Chodorow, a psychoanalytic feminist, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) states that the maternal instincts in a woman are shaped by her relationship with her mother. Because of the biological familiarity between the daughter and mother, the daughter is also subtly trained to assume the role of a mother in the future. Nazneen is thus prepared to play the role of a traditional submissive woman who submits to the man's needs. The rebellious spirit of the girls is curbed and controlled. Adolescence comes with a realization that her future is to surround catering to the needs of her husband and children. New Identity of a girl is constructed as soon as she enters her adolescence. She undergoes a complete transition of identity, unlike boys. This reflects the power politics of man and his validation of superiority by using the illness i.e. culture and tradition. The justification for depicting women as passive, deified, or defiled beings come from the Oedipus complex which states, "Freud claims that through Oedipus complex the unconscious mind formulates assigned gendered role for sexuality, believing that they are not devised by culture, but are biologically grounded" (Bottinelli, 2018: 24). So, the emotions assigned to the women are a product of the gendered role of sexuality and a woman's sexual and emotional identity remains secondary.

As the story moves to London, cultural and language barrier confines Nazneen to the four walls of the house. She spends her time doing the trivial and frivolous household work, cutting her husband's corns and removing the dead skin of his foot. She suffers alienation due to the language barrier. This alienation and feeling of subordination fuels the spark of emancipation in her. Nazneen experiences a transformation of character. She has become enlightened from her pandemic like suffering, ready to embrace change. She is not satisfied with the monotonous life that she is leading. But Chanu, her husband, confines Nazneen to the four walls of the house under the excuse of tradition. She wants to learn English but Chanu is reluctant and says "where is the need anyway" (Ali, 2004: 37). He wants her to stay at home for daily rituals like an obedient wife. Chanu knows that Language is a basic tool for successful communication and assimilation of immigrants in a new society. The language barrier is the cause of her social isolation in a new environment. Chanu understands this and doesn't want to lose control over her. He doesn't want her to go out of the house and mingle with people. He says "I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man that was a stroke of luck" (45). But at the same time he does not want to expose her to the public gaze. This is the power politics exercised by Chanu because by pretending to be a good husband he manipulates her into submission. Thus in the words of Millet in *Sexual Politics* "men are usually able to secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress. They do this through institutions such as academy, the church and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men" (Millet, 1977:35). Thus women are culturally nurtured to believe that they have no identity or role to play in society. They are prepared to play the role of a traditional submissive woman who submits to the man's needs

Chanu is concerned with fulfillment of his dreams and has no concern for his wife's wishes. The conversation between them is one sided with Chanu speaking all the time. Nazneen only replies in the affirmative, "If you say so, husband." Nazneen is treated as the 'other' becomes evident when Chanu says, "What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt. ... Any wife is better than no wife" (Ali, 2004: 23). Her only utility for Chanu lies in the fact that she is a good house keeper. Her views and opinions are irrelevant for Chanu. In this context, Perkins Gilman, an American novelist suggests the restructuring of domestic women to free them from unappreciated, wage-less domestic abuse. She believes that women must be integrated into the public domain as per their talent. The present scenario emphasis the end of an androcentric regime of men in society to fully liberate women from patriarchal clutches in social, cultural and religious sphere of life. We need to find an alternate source to place the voice of the marginalized on a pedestal. Dipesh Chakrabarty uses the term unworking for subaltern where "the practice of subaltern history is to take history, the codes, to its limits in order to make its 'unworking visible'" (Tejero, 2004: 89). Time is to rewrite history from below to make an effort to hear the unheard. Thus as desired by Chanu, Nazneen remains at home and looks after the domestic work. She always lives under the shadow of fear that 'a wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence' (Ali, 2004:22). Beating is an effective means to discipline and keep woman under control. Chanu never beats his wife. This makes Nazneen feel satisfied and happy that Chanu is not like other brutal men who inflict physical violence on women. Thus, by portraying himself as a modern and liberal man, Chanu plays the power politics. *Women in Bangladesh from Inequality to Empowerment* mentions, "In Bangladesh, women bear many of the marks of a 'disadvantaged minority' in the social, economic, political realms. The traditional society of Bangladesh is per-

meated with patriarchal values and norms of female subordination, subservience, subjugation and segregation. The reality of the women of Bangladesh and most specifically, the rural poor women and those living in the urban slums is that they remain a vulnerable, marginalized group that is yet to enjoy equality in status and access to services and resources with male counterparts. Women are found at the bottom rung of poverty, illiteracy and landlessness" (Mahtab 20-21). Thus the plight of uneducated Bangladeshi women is much worse as they silently confer to the patriarchal norms and have no representation in family or outside affairs.

"But now monotony makes Nazneen restless many a times. There was this shapeless, nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair, poisoned her lungs that made her both restless and listless" (Ali, 2004: 102). It was the voice of her conscious that made her listless and restless with the urge to do something extra ordinary. Her hidden desire for ice skating, moving on ice on one foot and flaunting her body and sexuality like the woman ice skater shows that she wants to defy Chanu's controlling authority. Despite the non conducive environment of her house, she derives her strength from the western world where modern women are blowing the couch of change and revolution. Considering them as her ideal, Nazneen undergoes a transformation of character from a submissive to an overtly confident woman. We see that years of oppression give birth to a community of awakened women who want to break free from the shackles of patriarchy. Thus every dark cloud has a silver lining as every pandemic brings about a ray of awakening to the sufferer. Slowly the desire to test her potentials begins to surface in her. Chanu's failure in getting a job impels her to start her sewing enterprise. It is the beginning of her emancipation from dependence on man. In the end Nazneen has emerged as a strong woman with an identity of her own while Chanu has proved to be a failure. The prospects of the family now depend upon her. She starts her tailoring business along with Razia and Sorupa without caring for the Muslim ethos which looks down upon a working woman. These women symbolize a coterie of independent thinking working women who have derived their lessons of life from the pandemic, which is the patriarchy. In the end she refuses to accompany Chanu to Dhaka because she detests the Bangladeshi culture which is orthodox in its treatment to women. But unfortunately very few women contain this spirit as they are subdued in the name of religion and culture. Thus it can be said that some change is witnessed among the economically independent and educated women as compared to the women who are dependent on men. Due to education, a literary community has surfaced which dares to think and question the standards and parameters set by patriarchy. Thus education is the first step towards liberation from the male tyranny.

### Conclusion

The hidden motive of patriarchy is to prevent handing over the reins of power to women. Men construct the concept of women from their point of view rather than what women are in reality. Women are designated as the 'other' while the men are the Self and the subject. In the views of Simone de Beauvoir the process of constructing the other is something fundamental to human consciousness and selfhood. These constructions then become the societal norms which then lead to women's oppression.

The research throws light on the vicious and manipulative strategies adopted by the powerful to grab power during the pandemic or otherwise. Power corrupts man. The weak and the ailing are always emboldened and frightened into submission through power tactics. Similarly the novel, *Brick Lane*, unveils the motive behind women subjugation which is greed for power. Patriarchy brings in the rhetoric of culture and tradition to validate its treatment of women. Matter of concern is the fact that patriarchy has naturalized its oppression and as a result women regard their exploitation as preordained destiny.

But it is observed that a breeze of change is blowing which is sure to turn into a storm. However, a new community of women thinkers have risen, who voice their suffering and their opinions through feminist literature. This community of women thinkers rejects the values imposed on them by culture and tradition which have become obsolete and redundant with time. This learned community of women thinkers emerged as a result of a pandemic like treatment meted out to them since centuries. They emphasize the need to revisit and evaluate every man made rules from a feminist point of view and according to the needs and preferences of the time and age. This enlightened class wants to substitute these misogynistic values with new unorthodox values. Drawing from the above study it can be said that only education is the key for liberation from the deadening weight of tradition. Thus only education can make women aware of their rights and oppression and empower them. Awareness can be spread only through education and literary community. Literature is the best way to educate women about the tactics of patriarchy and about their own rights. No doubt the impact of feminism is to be seen in some arena of society and women are becoming conscious of their rights and privileges. But women still face many problems as old attitudes die hard. The patriarchal mindset has not adjusted to the changing scenario. She is caught in the inexorable web of growing up, getting married, bearing children and dying. Beyond this there is hardly any function a woman is thought to be fit for. The researcher believes that literature has the power to touch the psyche and the sensibilities of man, and so the literary communities can help in bringing about a reformation.

Thus, it is time when the weak and the marginalized must make efforts to disman-

the power politics of the influential so that the world moves beyond the politics that widens the gap between the rich and poor and the man and the woman. During COVID-19 pandemic, the rights of women were violated just as seen on any other ordinary day. But the Pandemic opened new grounds for women to realize the extent of their oppression and find ways and means to counter it. The pandemic gave women a revelation and an opportunity to question the injustices of patriarchy. It gave voice to the voiceless. The pandemic led to the foundation of a strong literary community based on rationale, in which women fearlessly expressed their desires. So, we must realize that pandemic is another form of patriarchy for a woman and rights of woman must be restored from the hands of puissance whether it is times of pandemic or not.

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